

Offer ways to practice social justice

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

In the last column I wrote about the fact that Catholics have not been educated well in the social teachings of our church. That column did not move to the level of practical action, so I thought this time I would write about the program proposed by the United States Catholic Conference.

This program, promoted by one of the most helpful arms of our church, offers a practical approach by which individuals and communities can uphold the social teachings of our church.

There are four parts to the program advocated by the USCC. The first component is DIRECT SERVICE. This aspect of social justice action is probably the most obvious, and many of us have incorporated it into our lives. Service to those in need has become a natural part of the life of many parishes and individual Catholics.

Service in soup kitchens, outreach to families in trouble, and financial assistance to those in immediate difficulty are examples of ways we can provide direct service to marginalized and needy people. The gathering of food for Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets has become a traditional part of Catholic life for many of us.

The second aspect of the USCC's social-justice program is ADVOCACY. Every society contains people who are excluded, marginalized and ignored. These people's interests and



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needs are often overlooked or even deliberately trampled upon by many social institutions. Papal documents and other official teachings of our church admonish Catholics speak and act on behalf of these people.

Much Catholic advocacy for the rights of those who cannot speak for themselves is underway in legislatures, at stockholders meetings, and through the exercise of our right to vote. Many groups advocate on behalf of the unborn; homeless people and their needs have strong Catholic advocates working through lobbying efforts in Albany and in our own cities. Diocesan schools have done much to ensure that forms from the state education department stop asking children to identify themselves by race, knowing

that Americans of African descent often are targets of discrimination.

The third aspect of social-justice ministry is EMPOWERMENT. At times, groups in society need to be encouraged, organized and trained in order to work on their own behalf to address their own needs for justice. As Catholics, we have special reason to help in organizing those who would otherwise be ignored. Our U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy and the teaching of several generations of popes have urged us to live in solidarity with those in need.

In response to this call, several local churches have been working to help people living near downtown in Rochester to form their own credit union, and to become a strong enough coalition to bring about the foundation of a grocery store in their neighborhood. These efforts are helping to empower those affected by injustice and social need to work on their own behalf. People in my neighborhood have organized into Neighborhood Watch groups and work together to confront those who operate drug houses on our streets.

Finally, the fourth aspect of social-justice ministry advocated by the USCC is JUSTICE EDUCATION. Parishes and individuals are encouraged to learn more about the issues confronting their own society and other societies that constitute our global community. Today many parishes are sponsoring workshops on such topics as racism, sexism, poverty, hous-

ing and other economic problems.

Individuals, too, have mapped out programs of education in justice for themselves. One friend of mine resolved to spend one year learning about the problems of those living in Central America. Her study eventually led her to work in a refugee camp in Honduras. She is now actively involved in advocacy and justice education on behalf of these people.

The four aspects of the social-justice program advanced by the USCC give us one approach to a practical way of living the church's social teaching. Parishes can try to ensure that some members are involved in each one of these areas. I think that a good spiritual program for individual Catholics might include some direct service of those in difficulty, some advocacy on behalf of the excluded ones among us, some work helping to empower those affected by social problems, and some effort toward education on the issues of social justice.

At least two great theologians have written that when we find our faith to be weak, we should do something for "a poor person." Most people living in the 20th century indeed encounter times when their faith is weak.

While social-justice action helps those in need, we should not ignore its power to affect those who do it, as well. People who make a practice of working for the poor are quick to tell us that their faith is strengthened by their actions on behalf of justice. Let us follow their example.

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